

# The Demise of the Monroe Doctrine: Foreign Influence in Latin America

By Dr. William C. Spracher

## Introduction

Those of us schooled in U.S. history and its relationships with the rest of the Western Hemisphere have tended to take the exalted Monroe Doctrine as gospel. Going back to the early 19th century when this young nation was trying to demonstrate its sovereignty, its



*Groundbreaking ceremony of the Nicaragua Grand Canal, December 22, 2014 (People's Daily Online / Ren Jianmin)*

independence from former European colonial masters, and its leading role as the first truly democratic nation-state in the hemisphere, it was a hallmark of U.S. foreign policy to declare the hemisphere off-limits to meddling foreign powers. Formulated by President James Monroe in 1823, the doctrine was in essence a warning to European powers that “we should consider

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*About the Author: Dr. William C. Spracher is a faculty member in the Department of Regional Issues, College of Strategic Intelligence, National Intelligence University, where he has taught courses on Latin America, globalization, social analysis, leadership and management, and peacekeeping and stability operations. He formerly taught at the U.S. Military Academy and National Defense University while serving 30 years in the U.S. Army. As a Latin America Foreign Area Officer, he was an attaché in Colombia and Peru and a division chief for J2 SOUTHCOM in Panama.*

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any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety.”<sup>1</sup>

Although the United States was militarily weak in its formative years and hence often unable to back up its foreign policy with practical action, this was not the case in the 20th century. President Harry Truman said in 1947, “There has been a Marshall Plan for the Western [H]emisphere for a century and a half. [It is] known as the Monroe Doctrine.”<sup>2</sup> The Doctrine was often used as justification for U.S. intervention in its hemispheric partners’ affairs, whether it was sending Marines into Mexico, Central America, or the Caribbean; enforcing a quarantine against the Soviet Union as it was deploying intercontinental ballistic missiles to Cuba; or dropping paratroopers into the Dominican Republic and Grenada to protect U.S. interests. The Western Hemisphere has been seen traditionally as America’s “backyard,” to use an admittedly paternalistic analogy, or at least a region exclusively within the U.S. sphere of influence, with outsiders patently unwelcome. Whatever one’s view of the validity of the Monroe Doctrine—and there are scholars on both sides of the issue, some insisting it was critical for unfettered U.S. development in its formative years, some lamenting that it turned the United States into a patronizing monster—it has certainly been controversial for nearly two centuries.

This situation of essential U.S. hegemony in the Western Hemisphere is now being questioned, not only by those outsiders seeking a piece of the pie and some of those hemispheric states considered part of the pie but also by some U.S. policymakers themselves. The Obama administration, in particular, has decided it is time to close the books on the Monroe Doctrine, asserting that times have changed, the Cold War is over, and the economic and political success of the Hemisphere should not be viewed as a zero-sum game in which the rules of the game are unilaterally written by leaders in Washington. The official pronouncement came in a speech by Secretary of State John Kerry before the Organization of American States (OAS) in November 2013:

The era of the Monroe Doctrine is over... That’s worth applauding. That’s not a bad thing... The relationship that we seek and that we have worked hard to foster is not about a United States

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<sup>1</sup>Michael Reid, *Forgotten Continent: The Battle for Latin America’s Soul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 86.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 87.

declaration about how and when it will intervene in the affairs of other American states. It's about all of our countries viewing one another as equals, sharing responsibilities, cooperating on security issues, and adhering...to the decisions that we make as partners to advance the values and the interests that we share.<sup>3</sup>

This represented a dramatic break in U.S. foreign policy and caught many allies flatfooted. Some did not believe it, though continued retrenchment of U.S. involvement in the region ever since, except for the widely publicized rapprochement with Cuba announced in December 2014, seems to validate Kerry's bold statement.

As U.S. influence has waned, so too has that of regional organizations such as the Organization of American States, founded in 1948 and headquartered in Washington only blocks from the White House, and the Inter-American Defense Board, which was founded in Washington in 1942 and stands as the oldest continuously active defense arrangement in the world.<sup>4</sup> Alternative organizations with a decidedly anti-U.S. bent have sprung up in this century, including the Hugo Chavez-inspired Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA), the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Union of South American Nations, all of which deliberately exclude participation by the United States and Canada. Although these organizations have had both successes and failures, they nevertheless reflect a dissatisfaction with excessive control by distant North American, non-Hispanic, rich nations, and they have attracted the attention and support of foreign powers seeking to make inroads.

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<sup>3</sup>Zachary Keck, "The US Renounces the Monroe Doctrine?" *The Diplomat*, November 21, 2013, <http://thediplomat.com/2013/11/the-us-renounces-the-monroe-doctrine/>. See also James Morrison, "With Monroe Doctrine Dead, Obama to Host Latin American Leader," *The Washington Times*, December 2, 2013.

<sup>4</sup>William C. Spracher and Daniel O. Mason, *The Inter-American Defense Board: Challenges for the 21st Century*, May 1993, Inter-American Defense College monograph published in *Revista del Colegio Interamericano de Defensa* (annual journal of the IADB) as "The Inter-American Defense Board," Vol. 20 (1994). See also William C. Spracher, *The Inter-American Defense Board: A Study in "Alliance" Politics*, Master of Military Art and Science thesis (published by the National Technical Information Center), U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, June 1983.

## **Influence of Russia and China in Latin America**

This author was privileged to serve as thesis advisor for two students who graduated from the Master of Science of Strategic Intelligence program at the National Intelligence University (NIU) in 2015 and wrote about potential foreign threats to U.S. dominance in the region. Both papers were nominated for the LTG Vernon A. Walters Award for International Affairs. The first author demonstrated a passionate desire to learn more about Russian influence in the Western Hemisphere and produced an exceptional unclassified thesis titled “Russian Soft Power in Latin America: Cold War Politics and Spheres of Influence in the 21st Century.” The second author, a National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency analyst, was similarly intrigued by Chinese influence and wrote a classified thesis with the unclassified title “The Chinese-Built Nicaragua Interoceanic Grand Canal: Implications for U.S. Strategic Interests.”

Intrusions into the Western Hemisphere by Moscow are of course not new, as the Soviet Union was extremely active during the Cold War supporting Marxist-Leninist insurgencies and leftist regimes in places like Cuba and Nicaragua. Some observers see the current Russian resurgence in the region as nothing more than a reincarnation of Soviet activities, designed in part to tweak the nose of the United States. Others see it as something new, with a greater use of “soft” power versus “hard,” with more diplomatic and economic efforts and fewer military, and with different long-term objectives.<sup>5</sup> Likewise, China’s influence has been growing rapidly, as it has in other parts of the world such as Africa, and many view it as primarily extractive in nature, with the aim of economic exploitation to help support the burgeoning Chinese population back home. Iranian influence is a fairly recent phenomenon, helped along by sympathetic regimes in countries like Venezuela and Argentina. It reminds this author of the sorts of activities Libya was trying to carry out three decades ago, when an increasing number of “Libyan People’s Bureaus” were stirring up trouble for the United States in relatively poor, oil-starved countries in the Western Hemisphere. Simi-

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<sup>5</sup>The “soft power” concept was popularized in the 1990s by Harvard professor Joseph S. Nye, Jr., and later he introduced the hybrid concept of “smart power,” combining the best aspects of both “hard” and “soft.” For more details on the use of power in these contexts, see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *The Future of Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011). Some would argue that Russia is not doing very well in Latin America in this regard. See, for example, R. Evan Ellis, “Russian Influence in Latin America,” *The Cypher Brief*, January 5, 2016, <http://thecypherbrief.com>.

larly, Iran's oil wealth and anti-U.S. posture are attractive to some states now. No student chose to write about the growing influence of Iran and its proxy Hezbollah, which are generally considered more devious though less controversial in terms of their unsavory motives than the efforts orchestrated by Russia and China.

The two theses focused on issues that continue to spur further research interest in hemispheric affairs. This article will delve more deeply into the thesis on Russia. The thesis author observes that Russia is once again projecting power and influence beyond its borders as it did during the Cold War. The invasion and subsequent annexation of the Crimean Peninsula demonstrate the legitimacy of this assertion. After years of focusing on internal issues following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Moscow is seeking allies to avoid political isolation. Russia's foreign policy shift and adoption of a soft power doctrine have resulted in its projection of power and influence throughout the world, including into Latin America. The long-term effectiveness of this initiative—and Russia's commitment to it—remains to be seen. Nevertheless, Russia's soft power projection into Latin America has seen successes in the near term, and raises questions as to why Russia is attempting to grow its influence in the region. The author's research question was "How will the implementation of Moscow's soft power strategy in Latin America affect Russia's sphere of influence in the Western Hemisphere?" To answer this question, he examined the nature, purpose, and viability of Russia's soft power strategy in Latin America. He found that, while Russia is attempting to once again expand its sphere of influence into Latin America as it did during the Cold War, the ends, ways, and means of the strategy are out of balance, thereby resulting in a soft power strategy that may not be viable in the long term. The author assesses that, although Moscow is attempting to employ its soft power doctrine in Latin America for the purposes of countering NATO expansion throughout Russia's Near Abroad, the imbalance of the strategy reduces the likelihood of its sustained success.

The thesis author completed a richly detailed study of Russia's use of soft power in the Western Hemisphere, generally considered the backyard of the United States. Most observers, after having watched the Soviet Union implode a quarter century ago and essentially withdraw from its many longstanding connections within the Hemisphere, felt that Russian interference in the region was no longer of concern. However, President Vladimir Putin's

saber-rattling in former, now fiercely independent, Soviet republics and loud pronouncements about Russia's resurgence to superpower status have captured the attention of Westerners who fear Putin may be pushing the Russian bear back into distant parts of the world generally considered to be in other nations' spheres of influence.

The thesis digs deeply into the concerns of the United States and other Western nations about what Moscow might be up to. Putin is currying favor with virulently anti-U.S. countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and Ecuador (the core of the so-called ALBA coalition initially created by Hugo Chavez). He is doing this not through the hard power of the past—e.g., missiles in Cuba, high-performance aircraft in Nicaragua, electronic listening sites in Panama and Cuba—but primarily through soft power. Moscow is using economic initiatives, political and diplomatic agreements, cultural exchanges, and other forms of soft power, but with a slightly different twist to conventional soft power as we in the United States understand it. As a result, Russia to date has not caused many alarm bells to go off in Washington, which may or may not be a good thing.

Using the now-familiar soft power concept espoused by Joseph Nye, the DIME (Diplomatic, Informational, Military, and Economic) contextual framework, and Art Lykke's treatment of strategy in terms of ends, ways, and means, the thesis author does a masterful job in ascertaining what the Russians are really up to. Nevertheless, he concludes that Moscow's soft power strategy may not be viable in the long run. Despite a big push from Putin and receptive targets within the region looking to poke their fingers in the eye of the Obama administration at every opportunity, Moscow's strategy may not ultimately prevail.

Notwithstanding the thesis author's conclusions, Moscow continues to push its agenda in the Western Hemisphere. On November 30, 2015, on the margins of the United Nations Climate Change Summit in Paris, President Putin and Peru's President Ollanta Humala signed an agreement establishing a strategic partnership. A joint declaration included expanded cooperation in defense, counternarcotics, economic development, next year's Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) summit to be held in Lima, and climate change. Peru is the same country that turned to the Soviets for military assistance in the 1970s when the Carter administration began sanctioning the regime in power at the time for human rights abuses.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Ellis, "Russian Influence in Latin America."

Moving to the subject of China, this author first witnessed that nation's activities in South America while serving as Army Attaché to Peru and later Defense Attaché to Colombia in the 1990s. Beijing had robust military attaché offices in both countries, and its attachés were highly active in currying the favor of the host governments and always curious about what U.S. counterparts were doing. Some nascent military assistance efforts by the Chinese were evident, but nothing compared to the scope of effort witnessed today. China is a much more intrusive, self-proclaimed "global power" nowadays, and its explosive economic growth (at least until recently) can be partially attributed to its gains from developing new markets throughout the Third World. It has offered financial incentives to countries in Latin America, with one of the conditions being establishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing and de-recognition of Taiwan (of note, Central America and the Caribbean have the most governments of any region still recognizing Taipei as the seat of the legitimate Nationalist Republic of China, but that is changing rapidly). One of the most recent nations in the region to make the diplomatic switch from recognizing Taipei to Beijing is Costa Rica, which was enticed by such economic charms as China building a new sports stadium in San Jose, which opened in 2011.<sup>7</sup>

Probably the most visible recent manifestation of Chinese influence in the Western Hemisphere is the 2013 agreement between the Sandinista government of Nicaragua and an allegedly private company based in Hong Kong to build a new canal across the Central American isthmus. This canal would be a great boon to Chinese trade and likewise a potentially damaging competitor to the U.S.-built and formerly U.S.-administered Panama Canal. The latter has recently been expanded to accommodate larger ships but would still pale in comparison to the capacity of the longer, wider, more modern waterway farther to the north across Nicaragua. Some observers question the viability, both physical and financial, of such a massive project while others are suspicious as to whether the "private" company is really a front for the government in Beijing. To add to the controversy, there is considerable domestic opposition to the project inside Nicaragua itself due to its potentially detrimental environmental and social effects. Ever since the

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<sup>7</sup>Tony Manfred, "Here's Why China Gave Costa Rica a \$105 Million Stadium and Flooded Its Soccer Federation with Cash," *Business Insider*, November 16, 2011, <http://www.businessinsider.com/costa-rica-china-soccer-2011-11>. See also Rachel Will, "China's Stadium Diplomacy," *World Policy Journal*, Summer 2012, <http://www.worldpolicy.org/journal/summer2012/chinas-stadium-diplomacy>.

agreement for this project was formalized last year, observers have either downplayed the project as a pipe dream that will never be completed or fretted that, once finished, it will steal vital business away from the U.S.-built, but now Panama-operated and expanded, Panama Canal.

With a great deal of precision, the second thesis author thoroughly researched the pros and cons of this project. Of note was his tireless effort to interview in person several officials who were serving in Managua at the time the deal was sealed, or are still serving there. The result is a rich, detailed assessment of the Nicaragua Interoceanic Grand Canal (NIGC) project: its political, economic, and environmental consequences; and its chances for success. The author also examines the long-term impact on the viability of the Panama Canal and the influence of traditional Western powers in the region.

Since the thesis was completed, there have been conflicting reports as to whether the construction was likely to go ahead (preliminary work on land areas surrounding the proposed route commenced in December 2014). Most recently, a November 2015 report by Xinhua, China's official news agency, claimed that the host government in Managua had announced approval of an environmental and social impact study, allowing the project to proceed. The Interoceanic Grand Canal Commission reportedly now has the "green light for the Hong Kong-based firm HKND to start the structural and construction design phase of the megaproject."<sup>8</sup> The \$50-billion project, which will rival the Panama Canal when completed in 2019, is being built in the country's southwest region, with a considerable portion of its route crossing the large, fresh-water Lake Nicaragua. "The 278 km-long canal, which will be able to accommodate cargo ships with a maximum capacity of 18,000 shipping containers, is expected to spur the economy and potentially turn the country into a Central American trade hub, according to the Chinese."<sup>9</sup> Not all Nicaraguans agree; there have been massive protests against the Daniel Ortega-led leftist regime over such issues as silting of the lake, required forced evacuation and destruction of several villages in the

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<sup>8</sup>"Nicaragua Gives Green Light to Canal Project for Structural, Construction Design," *Xinhua*, November 6, 2015, [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/06/c\\_134791601.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2015-11/06/c_134791601.htm).

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

area, violation of the property rights of indigenous groups, and damage to a pristine lake which is home to the only fresh-water sharks in the world.<sup>10</sup>

The canal is just one example of China's thrust into the region; there are many more but none attracting so much worldwide attention and fascination. R. Evan Ellis, an incisive analyst, wrote a short article titled "The Rise of China in the Americas."<sup>11</sup> He tends to be middle of the road in terms of whether all this effort by Beijing is positive or negative for Washington. He evenhandedly lays out the pros and cons of China's thrust into the Hemisphere. Others fall either into the camp that would invoke the Monroe Doctrine and insist on keeping the Chinese out or the camp that would say there is plenty of room for all comers, and that there are more important issues over which to confront China than economic development of growing countries in the Hemisphere. A recent argument for that side appeared in the *Washington Post* "Outlook" section in January 2016, with the provocative title "Let China Win. It's Good for America." That piece argued that the United States should "compete only when it matters... We should marshal our capital for the challenges that are truly challenging."<sup>12</sup>

Not all of China's and Russia's efforts are seen as positive for the peoples of the Americas, regardless of how they might affect U.S. policy interests. Most recently, another *Washington Post* article concluded with this interesting observation:

...a butterfly flapped its wings in China and caused a political hurricane in South America. Between 2000 and 2014, China's demand for raw materials of every kind was so great that prices soared and the coffers of commodity-based economies did, too. That gave South American governments the money they needed to redistribute to their poor, and they did. But a combination of bad luck and bad management has left them without much margin for error today—which they need now that commodity

<sup>10</sup>Reese Erlich, "Nicaragua Divided over Enormous Canal Project," *ABCRadioNational*, July 6, 2015, <http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/earshot/nicaragua-divided-over-enourmous-canal-project/6597282>. See also "Nicaragua's Panama Canal Alternative 'Can Now Move Forward with Full Speed' after Environmental Permit Issued," *Asia/Pacific News*, November 9, 2015, <http://shipandbunker.com/news/apac/340164>.

<sup>11</sup>R. Evan Ellis, "The Rise of China in the Americas," *Security and Defense Studies Review* 16 (2014), 90-105.

<sup>12</sup>Joshua Kurlantzick, "Let China Win. It's Good for America," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 2016, B1, B4.

prices have come down as a result of China slowing down. In a global economy, politics is, too.<sup>13</sup>

## Conclusion

In part to pursue their economic interests in Asia on their own without China's heavy hand, several Latin American nations have created the so-called Pacific Alliance. Although these countries are unlikely to become a single market in the foreseeable future, they do "share a commitment to free trade that sets them apart from South American neighbors' increasingly protectionist policies."<sup>14</sup> Those countries with Pacific coastlines which see membership in the Alliance as a way of increasing economic ties to Asia include Chile, Colombia, Mexico, and Peru (which, as was mentioned earlier, is heavily involved in APEC). Costa Rica and Panama have "observer-candidate" status. Other observer nations include Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Guatemala, and Uruguay.<sup>15</sup> As the United States continues its "pivot" or "rebalance" to Asia, a goal of the Obama administration, perhaps this is one way to encourage officials in Washington to pay greater attention to its own "backyard" in the Western Hemisphere. Whether or not the final nail should be driven in the coffin of the Monroe Doctrine, Latin America and the Caribbean are unquestionably vital for the future health and well-being of the United States.

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<sup>13</sup>Matt O'Brien, "Why South America's on the Edge of an Economic Abyss," *The Washington Post*, December 15, 2015, A14.

<sup>14</sup>"Latin America's Pacific Alliance Set to Sign FTA Today," *Oxford Analytica Daily Brief*, February 10, 2014.

<sup>15</sup>"Join the Club: The Growing Pacific Alliance," *The Economist*, April 29, 2013.

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